

Education Committee
March 1, 2010

Testimony of Mark K. McQuillan, Commissioner of Education

ON

Raised Bills 275, 279, 278, 5316, 280, 5315

Raised Bill 275: AN ACT CONCERNING STAFF QUALIFICATIONS FOR SCHOOL READINESS PROGRAMS FOR 2015

The Department of Education strongly supports **Raised Bill 275, An Act Concerning Staff Qualifications for School Readiness Programs for 2015**. Current law requires that by 2015 school readiness classrooms are staffed with teachers who hold (1) a bachelor's degree from an accredited higher education institution in early childhood education, child development, or a related commissioner-approved field; or (2) a teaching certificate with a special education or early childhood endorsement. This target standard cannot be reached given: (1) the insufficient numbers of four-year Early Childhood Education (ECE) degree programs; and (2) the time it takes for those pursuing these degrees to complete their program.

This bill seeks to remedy these problems by revising the staff requirements to require that half of the teachers in programs accepting school readiness funds have either (1) a bachelor's degree from an accredited higher education institution or (2) a teaching certificate with an early childhood education endorsement. The remaining half of the teachers must have an associate's degree from an accredited higher education institution. All teachers, whether they have a bachelor's degree or an associate's degree, would have to either obtain a **new early childhood credential** that establishes competencies based on performance by completing a program of study approved by the Commissioner of Higher Education or hold a teaching certificate in early childhood education.

The 2015 standards in current state law are unattainable for a number of reasons. First, DHE analysis demonstrated it is not possible to prepare enough bachelors' level teachers to meet this requirement by 2015 - only 31% of teachers in these programs currently have a bachelor's degree. Further, certified teachers normally do not accept positions in community settings. They take teaching positions in the public schools where the salaries are higher and the benefits and hours are better.

While some may see the revised staffing requirements proposed in this bill as a step backwards, this bill actually raises the current standards for all teachers in state-funded School Readiness, Head Start, and DSS Child Care Centers (community-based early childhood settings) to an *attainable* standard for 2015. This proposal aligns with national policy and it represents significant progress over our current standard. As such, the Department of Education supports Raised Bill 275.

Raised Bill 279: AN ACT CONCERNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES TAUGHT IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Department of Education opposes Raised Bill 279, which seeks to amend the current graduation requirements by increasing the number of credits required to graduate from 20 to 22 and require that every student earn at least two credits in world languages in order to graduate, commencing with the class of 2016. The Department certainly agrees that all students should be required to take courses in world languages in order to graduate; however, we believe that this proposal should be part of a comprehensive reform package. In addition, changing the graduation requirements to include world languages without providing any resources for school districts to hire additional teachers is an unfunded mandate at a time when many town budgets are extremely tight. Based on an analysis conducted by Department staff in the summer of 2008, approximately seventeen school districts, including the state's technical high schools, New Britain, Waterbury, Bridgeport, and Danbury, would have to hire new staff in order to meet this requirement.

The Department believes that the proposal in this bill be encompassed as part of a comprehensive reform plan for the state's secondary schools. The State Board of Education has put forth a proposal this session that incorporates the revised graduation requirements, as well as the student success plans, end-of-course examinations, and senior year course demonstration project, that are a part of the Connecticut Plan-- Department's Secondary School Reform proposal, into Connecticut's accountability statute, section 10-223c. The Department's proposal would grant the State Board of Education the authority to require failing school districts to adopt these new requirements, subject to available funding. While the Department would prefer that the Connecticut Plan be adopted statewide, this proposal allows for any available funding for this proposal to be concentrated on the neediest districts.

In addition, the Race to the Top grant competition has provided the state with an vehicle to help participating districts who have signed on to our state's application to adopt and implement the Connecticut Plan, in two phases over a period of eight years. In Part I, participating districts will work with the Department and external partners to implement the initial or foundational work needed to effectuate the changes called for in the Plan, including the hiring of additional mathematics and science teachers, in anticipation of the new core curriculum. In Part II, participating districts will complete the work needed to staff their schools and prepare teachers for implementing the full set of graduation requirements for the class of 2018. The Department believes that this comprehensive approach, which provides districts and students with adequate time and resources to prepare, will ensure the successful implementation of the Connecticut Plan.

Given all this, the Department must oppose Raised Bill 279.

Raised Bill 278: AN ACT CONCERNING TRUANCY

The Department is in agreement with the concepts in Raised Bill 278, An Act Concerning Truancy, but seeks some clarification as to the extent of the burden that this bill will place on the Department and local school districts.

Section 1 of Raised Bill 278 requires the superintendent of schools to file a Family with Service Needs petition if the parent or responsible adult in a student's life is not cooperating with the school to address ongoing concerns related to truancy. The Department supports this proposal as such a referral should be done expeditiously if the parent or guardian is not cooperating. However, the bill language in section one should be revised to clarify whether fifteen days means fifteen school days, calendar days, or business days.

Section 2 of this bill requires the State Department of Education to define "excused" and "unexcused" absences for the purpose of determining whether a child is truant or not. Currently, there is no uniform definition of these terms and districts across the state have different policies as to what types of absences are excused and what are not. As such, when the Department receives data as to the rate of truancy in a school district, such data is not comparable from district to district.

While the Department agrees that these terms need to be defined, the timing proposed in the bill is unrealistic. If the Department were to establish a uniform definition for excused and unexcused absences in the 2010-2011 school year, working with districts and other stakeholders across the state, districts would only begin to collect that data in the fall of 2011, which means the Department would not be able to prepare a report for the General Assembly until July 1, 2012.

Further, it is not clear from the language in the bill as written what the Department is being asked to report once the definitions are established. Currently, we report truancy data in the aggregate through the Strategic School Profile Reports gathered every fall. If this is all that is expected of the Department moving forward, no additional resources would be required. However, if the intent of the legislation is to do more than this, such as track the *number* of excused and unexcused absences for every student in public schools, variables would need to be added to both state and local student information systems, which would require additional time and resources to modify such data collection systems.

Raised Bill 5316: AN ACT CONCERNING ENROLLMENT IN ADULT EDUCATION

The Department opposes Raised Bill 5316, An Act Concerning Enrollments in Adult Education, for the intent of the bill as drafted is unclear. The Department supports efforts to discourage school districts from encouraging students eighteen and younger from enrolling in adult education programs. Adult education serves a very important segment of our population but it has long been underfunded and it cannot afford to divert resources on students who should be enrolled in a comprehensive high school. However, this bill does not meet that goal as currently drafted.

First, the proposed language in Section 1 of the bill appears to strip the requirement that a student must be withdrawn from school prior to enrolling in adult education. Second, the reference in Section 1 to subsection (a) of section 10-220 is confusing as this statute does not clearly define at what age a student is ineligible to enroll in a comprehensive high school. Third, the proposed subsection C of Section 1 of the bill requires students "sixteen years of age or over"

to obtain special permission to enroll in adult education. As written it appears to mean that a 40 year old person will need permission from the superintendent to enroll in adult education.

Section 2 of the bill appears to conflict with two provisions in current law. Under 10-69(a), any student enrolled in a full-time program of study is prohibited from enrolling in an adult education activity without the approval of a principal. This bill requires permission of the school superintendent but does not amend section 10-69. The Department supports limiting access to adult education however, these two provisions seem to contradict one another as to what level of sign off is required and whether a student may enroll in an adult education "program" or simply an "activity." In addition, section 53 of Public Act 09-06 raises the minimum age for withdrawal from a comprehensive school with parent or guardian consent to seventeen, effective July 1, 2011, but Section 2 of HR 5316 appears to allow a parent to seek enrollment of their sixteen year old child in adult education at only age sixteen.

Until these issues are resolved, the Department must oppose this bill.

Raised Bill 280: AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION

The Department opposes Raised Bill 280, An Act Concerning School Transportation. The first provision of the bill prohibits regional educational service centers ("RESCs") from providing school transportation services for member boards. Currently, the Department relies on the RESCs to provide transportation where the law does not designate a specific provider, such as for those students attending magnet schools. The language in the bill as written would prohibit this from occurring in the future which may impact the state's ability to meet the court mandated goals required as a part of the stipulated agreement in the matter of Sheff v. O'Neill.

The second provision in the bill allows for a parent or guardian to waive a student's right to school transportation for the school year. The department opposes this proposal as it could potentially violate a student's right to an education and it is not necessary. Each student possesses a state constitutional right (Article Eight, Section 1) to a free education in public schools and a statutory right to be provided transportation from a board of education when such transportation is reasonable and desirable (C.G.S. Section 10-220(a)). Any denial of school accommodations by transportation may infringe upon these rights.

In addition, a parent or guardian is obligated under section 10-184 of the General Statutes to cause such child between the ages of five and eighteen to attend school. If the parent or guardian signs such a waiver and then is unable to transport their child to school or decides to withdraw driving privileges to their child, the parent or guardian is at risk of being in violation of the law. Further, students whose parents who have waived their right to transportation and who are then forced to walk to school, may result in exposure to danger when walking to school along routes that the board of education has determined to be hazardous or dangerous under its transportation policy or guidelines.

Low ridership of student transportation at the high school level may be addressed through other methods. First, current law requires that a school board only provide transportation where "reasonable and desirable." Therefore, the issuance of a student parking permit on campus may

be construed as a waiver of the transportation service offered by the board of education. The board of education would not be expected to provide transportation during the period that the student actively uses the student parking permit. However, if student's parking privileges are revoked or the student is no longer permitted to drive as a result of legal action or parental direction, the student who is eligible for transportation pursuant to the policy or guidelines of the board of education must be provided school accommodations by transportation during the school year.

As such, the Department opposes this proposal.

Raised Bill 5315: AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATION AND THE REDUCTION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The Department supports Raised Bill 5315 which seeks to incorporate "teen dating violence" and domestic violence to the list of in-service training programs that each local or regional board of education shall provide to teachers, administrators and pupil personnel. The bill also requires the State Board of Education to assist and encourage local and regional boards to include domestic violence and teen dating violence as part of in-service training programs, within available appropriations and utilizing available materials.

Of note, the Department of Education does not have curriculum for teen dating violence prevention available. We do have the Healthy and Balanced Living Curriculum Framework available for free on our website that includes standards and performance indicators which can be used by districts to develop their own health education curriculum.